

THE SPIDER'S PARLOR

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"CONSPIRATORS," ETC.

BEING THE SIXTH OF THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF
MR. STANLEY BROOKE, THE DELIBERATE DETECTIVE

BROOKE missed the sound of the typewriter as he entered her room, but, to his immense relief, Constance was there. She was sitting back in her easy-chair, her eyes were half closed, she seemed pale and tired. The windows were wide open but the air of the little room was stifling.

"Constance!" he exclaimed, "I beg your pardon, Miss Robinson—you see I am back again."

She seemed suddenly to pull herself together. The lines were still under her weary eyes, but she held herself upright and she spoke briskly.

"So I observe," she remarked. "I am sorry—"

She hesitated, looking at his dark clothes and black tie. He came over to her, dragging a chair with him.

"I am not going to try and be a hypocrite," he said. "It was an uncle whom I have seen only half a dozen times in my life, and he has left me a little money. He was eighty-one years old. Why on earth should I be sorry?"

"No reason at all that I can see," she admitted, smiling. "I suppose you have come to tell me, then, that our partnership is at an end?"

"On the contrary," he answered swiftly, "I have come to beg for a new one."

She was conscious, almost as soon as she had spoken, of the opportunity which her words had given him. She shrank a little away but he caught at her hands and held them boldly.

"Constance," he said, "you've known all the time, of course. You're horrid to

me, and I haven't cared to say much before because, after all, I had only what I could earn with you and through you. I've a reserve fund to fall back upon now. Will you marry me, please, dear?"

She drew her hands firmly away.

"Most certainly and decidedly not," she declared.

Brooke sighed.

"It sounds a little uncompromising," he remarked.

"It is exactly how I feel," she assured him. "I have not the slightest desire to marry you or any one. What I've seen of married life," she went on, a little sadly, "has been quite enough to prevent my ever thinking about it for myself as long as I live."

"But surely," he pleaded, "you do not allow yourself to be influenced by one, or even two, unfortunate marriages?"

She shook her head.

"I cannot discuss it," she said. "Fortunately for me, I am one of those people who are able to take care of themselves, who can live alone and not feel the want of any one's society. You see, I am not at all the sort of girl men like. I am a little hard, a little bitter. There have been things in my life which have made me so. The world is full of girls, Mr. Brooke, who would make you excellent wives, and who are only waiting for the opportunity. Please put away all such thoughts in connection with me."

He sat in silence for a few moments.

"I wonder," he remarked, "is there anything in your life which accounts for your unnatural attitude towards matrimony?"

She sighed.

"Some day," she answered, "I may tell you—certainly not at present. Now, please, get all these foolish ideas out of your head. There is some business to talk about."

"I will talk business in five minutes," Brooke said. "Before I do so, I insist upon knowing what has happened to this room."

He looked around him wonderingly. Constance sat quite still, but her lips were quivering.

"I have got rid of a few articles of furniture which I did not require," she declared. "Nothing else has happened to it that I know of."

"Your little water-colors have gone," he pointed out, "your two bronzes, all the china from your cabinet, all the silver from that little what-not. Were you thinking of moving, or—"

"Or what?"

"Have you sold them?"

"I do not consider, Mr. Brooke," she said, "that this matter concerns you at all."

"We are partners," he objected.

"We are partners inasmuch as we divide the profits of certain of our undertakings," she replied. "We have done that, and there is an end of it."

"If we are partners in good fortune," he insisted doggedly, "we are also partners in ill fortune."

"I am not prepared to grant anything of the sort," she rejoined. "Since you are so ill-bred as to be inquisitive, I will admit that I have sold some of my things. I had a pressing claim and I had to satisfy it."

"But why on earth couldn't you telegraph me?" he exclaimed. "You knew where I was."

"Why on earth should I?" she replied.

"You know very well that what I have—"

"What you have has nothing to do with me," she declared firmly. "I have a burden to carry through life and I mean to carry it myself. What it is I have no idea of telling you—at any rate for the present. If you find out, it will be against my will. Sometimes it keeps me poor. At other times it is no trouble at all. Whatever it is, it is my affair and mine alone. Now, will you please sit quite still? I want to talk to you about something else."

Brooke kept silent with an effort.

"Very well," he muttered. "For the present, then—only for the present. You can go on."

"I suppose," she began, "I have been wasting my time the whole of the fortnight you have been away. I couldn't help it. I am going to make a confession. That down-stairs room in the Café Hollande has fascinated me. I haven't been able to keep away from it. I think what makes it the more attractive really is that they hate the sight of me there."

"The place has been thoroughly searched, hasn't it?" he interposed.

"From cellar to attic. Directly the manager was spoken to and it was hinted to him that suspicions had been aroused concerning the restaurant, he placed all his keys at the disposal of Mr. Simmons, and he insisted upon their searching every room and cross-questioning whomever they chose."

"Not a single suspicious circumstance came to light, not a single thing to connect the place with Paul of Delacher's Hotel, or with any other person. Mr. Simmons himself told me that he was sure there had been some mistake. I told him about Fritz, the man whose dead body was found in the Thames. I told him how genuinely terrified he was when he heard that we had lunched there. Mr. Simmons only shook his head. You know how obstinate he is. He had made up his mind."

"Very well, I said no more. But since then the Café Lugano has seen little of me. I have lunched in that gloomy room down-stairs at the Hollande nearly every day. Sometimes I have dined there as well. They keep on charging me more and more. They bring me indifferent things to eat. They keep me waiting an unconscionable time. I say to myself 'Never again will I set foot inside this place!' and in a few hours I am back again."

"This isn't like you," he remarked, wonderingly.

"Not a bit," she admitted. "I have never believed in presentiments. I haven't cared about anything but direct methods. Yet I am going to tell you something. I know perfectly well that there are things connected with the Café Hollande which have never been discovered. Do you know what I call it to myself—the Spider's Parlor! Things go on there which no one has any idea of."

"But in what part of the place?" Brooke asked.

"I do not know," she answered, "only I feel quite sure that there is something mysterious about that half-underground room, with just those few tables and the three musicians. They are turning people away all the time up-stairs. It would be perfectly easy to add fifty more tables down-stairs, instead of which they keep it empty. The few people who are there seem either to have drifted in by accident, or to have some special interest in the place. However, there is something more to tell you."

She glanced at the clock, which was just striking four.

"To-day," she went on, "as I came out, I stopped to give something to the musicians. The man who plays the piano was the only one there. The other two had turned away for a minute. I wonder whether you remember him? He was a strange, dark-looking creature, with queer eyes."

Brooke nodded.

"I remember him perfectly."

"He seemed to have a sudden idea when I spoke to him," she went on. "There was no one within hearing. He asked me in an undertone for my address."

"The infernal cheek—" Brooke began.

Constance shook her head.

"Don't be absurd," she said quietly.

"He did not ask in that sort of way. The only other two words he said were 'Four o'clock.' Now suppose you go to the door and open it."

There was a sound of knocking outside. Brooke obeyed. It was indeed the musician who stood there. He wore a long black overcoat, notwithstanding the heat of the day, and he carried a soft black hat in his hand. He stared hard at Brooke with one eye, and blinked rapidly with the other.

"Miss Robinson?" he asked.

"She is here," Brooke replied. "Come in."

The man came into the room. Constance rose to her feet.

"This gentleman," she said, indicating Brooke, "is a friend of mine. You need not hesitate to speak before him. What is it you wish to say?"

The man laid his hat upon the table.

"Young lady," he began, "I do not quite know why I spoke to you. I was

beside myself this morning. They have dismissed me, those people at that rathole. I sat there thinking when you passed. You, too, have been in that place often, and I wondered, as the others wonder, for what purpose. I said to myself that we would speak with one another. Who can tell what may come of it?"

"I have nothing whatever to conceal," she told him. "I have been so often into that wretched little room at the Café Hollande because the place seems to me so mysterious, and because I am interested in unraveling queer things and visiting strange places. I have always a fancy that there are secrets almost within the reach of one's hands there."

The man leaned forward. He was English enough, and yet there was a strain of some foreign blood in him. His gestures were theatrical but natural.

"It is the truth!" he exclaimed. "There are things going on there which no one knows of. There are certain visitors who are brought with much ceremony to the little room down-stairs, and on those nights we are sent away early. What happens? Who knows? But that visitor never comes another time. He is never seen again."

"You," he went on, pointing to Brooke, "were brought down there one day, and the young lady. Nothing happened. The young lady has been often since. Yet believe me or not, as you choose, never do I remember any one else escorted down those stairs by Jean whose face I have ever seen again!"

"But there are always a few customers there," Constance objected.

"Dummies!" the musician declared. "They are creatures of the restaurant. There is barely a single genuine customer. Why should they come? The place is nearly empty. Only one or two tables are set there; it is cold and drafty, the service is slow. *Mademoiselle* is the only one from the outside world who has been there often, and I have seen them watch her—watch her from up-stairs, watch her from the other places. Sometimes I have had it in my mind to speak to her."

"Tell me," Brooke asked, "you seem to have been suspicious of this place for some time. Have you discovered anything?"

"A trifle which may not be a trifle," the musician answered. "It was only yesterday. There was a wine merchant who called. Jean complained bitterly of some

wine. We could hear them upon the stairs.

"It was arranged that Jean should go into the cellars and bring up several bottles at hazard. Jean passed us, went behind the bar, opened the trap-door and stepped down. I saw him disappear with my own eyes. In a moment or two the wine merchant came down the stairs. He inquired for Monsieur Jean. I pointed to the open trap-door.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, 'he has gone to fetch the wine. I will help him.' He hurried across the room and began to descend the steps. Presently he returned. 'There is no one there,' he declared.

"It was in the intervals of playing. I myself descended with him. The cellar was empty. We searched it everywhere. Then we both ascended. While we spoke of this thing we heard footsteps. Jean appeared with the bottles. I turned away. I heard Jean explain that he had been behind a bin in the corner, but I know better. Jean was not in the cellar at all."

"But surely it is not impossible," Brooke interposed, "that there should be another way out of the cellar?"

"There is a way for letting cases down from the street," the man replied, "but that is almost perpendicular, and Jean could not have been hidden there or gone out that way. I know a short time ago there came men who searched those cellars, searched them carefully, yard by yard. They found no other exit. It was for that they were looking. To-day I know that they were wrong. There is another exit. That is all I have to say."

"I do not quite understand, after all," Constance remarked, "why you have come to me. You have realized that I was interested in the restaurant, but is that all?"

The man took up his hat slowly.

"I know," he declared, "that you are an enemy of the place. I have seen Jean's face grow black when you have entered. I have heard orders given that you were to be served slowly and badly. I know that for some reason they are afraid of you there. Therefore, it seemed to me that, hating the place as I do, you were the person to whom I might bring the little information I have."

Brooke put his hand in his pocket.

"If a trifling loan," he suggested, "while you are out of work—"

"I shall accept it with pleasure, sir," the man replied. "And if anything should come of this—"

He wrote down his address upon a piece of paper.

"There may be other questions," he continued, "matters which have seemed to me unimportant."

"There is just one thing I should like to ask you," Constance said, as he turned to go. "Besides myself there seems to be one habitué of the place from the general public—a little man with gold glasses, who is always reading a paper. They treat him almost as rudely as they do me."

The musician nodded.

"He is a doctor, miss," he told her, "who has a surgery near. That is all I know. I have seen them look at him, also, as though they wished him somewhere else. He comes in, I think, because it is near his place. They serve him, too, badly, but he takes no notice. He reads always more than he eats. Good day, miss! Good day, sir!"

"Entirely as a matter of business," Brooke proposed, as the door closed behind their visitor, "I suggest that we dine to-night at the Café Hollande."

"It would perhaps be advisable," Constance assented.

They were met at the head of the stairs by Jean, who hurried along the crowded room towards them.

"If I could only persuade *mademoiselle*," he begged, "to dine here! I will arrange a round table for two. Downstairs it is so *triste* and damp."

"Another time, Jean," Brooke declared. "I have been away, and we have a little matter to talk over, *mademoiselle* and I. We like the quiet down there."

Jean shrugged his shoulders. It was unaccountable. However, it must be as *mademoiselle* preferred. He escorted them down the stairs himself.

"We are having plans made," he confided to them, "for turning this into a large grill-room. It is only the kitchen accommodation which is difficult. *Mademoiselle* will like her accustomed seat?"

They decided to move farther into the corner, however, and found themselves at the next table to the little gentleman with the gold spectacles, who favored them with a bland but benevolent stare. He called Jean to him.

"Waiter," he said, in a smooth, culti-

vated voice, "I have dined here for two months and I have never made a complaint."

"I am glad that *monsieur* has been so well served," Jean remarked.

"I have been abominably served," was the indignant reply. "I care little for my food. I come here only because it is quiet and because I may read and because it is near my work. But even a worm will turn. I desire to inform you that your food is the worst I have ever tasted, that it reaches me half cold, that your service is abominable and your charges exorbitant. After to-night I shall look for another restaurant. It is all."

The natural instinct of the *maitre d'hôtel* seemed for the moment to triumph in Jean. He started to make apologies, but the little man waved him away.

"It is my first complaint," he declared. "It is my last."

Jean departed. The little man was settling down again to his papers. He glanced for a moment, however, at Constance.

"I trust," he said, "that I have not made myself objectionable? You, madam, also have been, I believe, an *habitué* here. I must confess that I wonder at it."

Constance smiled.

"I certainly have not come here to dine well or cheaply," she admitted. "I think really I have come because I am fond of the unusual and because there is something about the place which rather mystifies me."

"In what way?" the little gentleman asked.

She shook her head.

"Just an idea."

The little gentleman drew his newspaper closer to him.

"Madam," he said, "I have no faith in ideas. I am a physician. Science is at once my mistress and my hobby. It provides me with all the mysteries I require. As for this place, it is nothing but a drafty, ill-managed hole. I have finished with it. Pardon me."

He plunged into his paper with the air of one who has concluded a conversation. There were only two other customers in the room—one a powerful, sunburnt man in tweed clothes, who sat with a bottle of wine in front of him and a newspaper propped up against it, dining, apparently, entirely to his satisfaction. The other had

the appearance of being one of the staff. The dinner was a little better than usual, and curiously enough it was served almost precipitately.

"One would imagine," Brooke remarked, "that they wanted to get rid of us."

Constance looked around the room. The tablecloths had been removed from the other tables and there were no signs of any other diners being expected.

"What about our friend there?" she inquired, moving her head slightly towards the sunburnt man.

"A countryman or colonial," Brooke decided, "wandered in here by accident. Probably didn't care for it up-stairs because of his clothes and thick boots."

"He looks like that," she admitted.

They finished their dinner presently. There seemed to be nothing to wait for. The little doctor had lit a pipe and was reading over his coffee. The sunburnt man was leaning back in his chair, apparently thoroughly satisfied with his dinner. As they passed out, Brooke obeyed a sudden impulse and spoke to him.

"Do you mind if I take one of your matches?" he asked.

The man pushed them to him without a word. Brooke made some difficulty about striking one.

"Everything down here seems damp," he remarked. "Gives one the feeling of being half underground, doesn't it?"

The sunburnt man looked up at Brooke and frowned. Then he turned a little away, crossing his legs, and took up his paper again.

"Hadn't noticed it," he declared, shortly.

Brooke caught Constance up, smiling.

"Your friend with the red cheeks," he told her, "has about the worst manners of any man I ever knew. He seemed afraid of being spoken to."

She laughed.

"I noticed that he didn't seem to take to you," she remarked. "At any rate, he seems very well able to take care of himself."

They passed Jean, descending the stairs with a bottle of old brandy in his hand. Brooke left the place almost reluctantly.

"Well?" Constance asked.

"I suppose that fellow's all right," Brooke said thoughtfully. "The little doctor was just getting up to go as we

came away. He will be the last one in the room."

"I never saw any one who looked better able to take care of himself," Constance murmured.

The night was hot, the streets were light as day. As though by common consent, they walked. At the corner of Piccadilly Circus, Brooke halted.

"What do you say to a ride on the top of a motor omnibus?" he suggested.

"It would perhaps be pleasant," she assented.

"There's one at the corner there, for Hampstead," he said. "Come."

They were crossing the road when Constance felt a light touch on her arm. She turned quickly around. Inspector Simmons of Scotland Yard was walking by her side.

"Stroke of luck, seeing you, Miss Robinson," he remarked.

"I am glad you think so," she answered. "You know Mr. Brooke, don't you?"

Mr. Simmons bit his lip.

"Of course I do. Sorry! I only caught sight of you that moment. Are you in a hurry, Miss Robinson?"

"I am never in a hurry," she replied, "if there is anything to be done."

"Will you please both step into the Monico with me, then?" he begged. "We will have some coffee. I want to show you a letter."

"Certainly," Constance agreed.

Mr. Simmons escorted her politely to the door of the restaurant. Brooke looked a little regretfully at the top of the motor omnibus, and followed. They found a small table against the wall and Mr. Simmons ordered coffee. Then he drew from his pocket a letter, which he did not, however, at once open.

"I wonder," he said, "if you have either of you heard of the Eburian Copper Mine?"

"Of course," Brooke replied. "The annual meeting is to-morrow, isn't it? They say there's going to be an awful row."

"There probably will be," Mr. Simmons assented. "I know we've orders to draft a hundred police down to the Cannon Street Hotel. Let me remind you of the facts. Miss Robinson may not know them."

"There have been six hundred thou-

sand pounds' worth of shares issued and paid for on the strength of certain reports. A month ago there was a sensational article in the *Financial Times*, absolutely discrediting the mine. There was a fearful panic, of course, and the company sent out the greatest known mining expert—a man named Haslem—to make an independent report. He has not been allowed to send a telegram or a letter. He arrived in London secretly to-night. The meeting is to-morrow."

Brooke and Constance were both interested now. Their coffee stood before them, neglected.

"To-night," the detective continued, slowly unfolding the letter, "I was in my office when this was brought in—this with an enclosure. I will read the letter first. It seems to be from Haslem and it is written from Delacher's Hotel:

"DEAR SIR,

"I received the enclosed letter on my arrival in London this evening. I am sending it on to you as a matter of form, for I think I can take care of myself. You may know me by name. I have to give evidence at the Cannon Street Hotel to-morrow with regard to the Eburian Mine.

"Faithfully,

"JOHN HASLEM."

Brooke and Constance had exchanged swift glances.

"Delacher's Hotel!" she murmured.

"Now for the enclosure," Mr. Simmons continued. "Here it is—the usual sort of thing—plain paper, typewritten, and all the rest of it. Let me read it:

"MR. HASLEM.

"SIR,

"To-morrow you are going to give evidence which will practically ruin half-a-dozen of the most unscrupulous company promoters in London. Read the advice of a friend. Take care of yourself to-night. London is not altogether the city of safety one is apt to believe.

"FROM ONE WHO KNOWS."

"What have you done about this?" Brooke asked quickly.

"I sent a new man whom no one would recognize, to Delacher's Hotel," Mr. Simmons announced. "He did his work quite satisfactorily. Haslem arrived at about five o'clock and must have sent that note off to me very soon afterwards. He took a bedroom and asked Paul, the head porter, for some quiet place where he could dine without being noticed, as he didn't wish to

be seen in London at all till next day. Paul directed him to—where do you think?"

Constance was sitting quite still. Her eyes seemed to have grown larger.

"To the Café Hollande!" she cried.

The inspector smiled a little indulgently.

"I know you have that place on the brain, Miss Robinson," he said. "Personally, as I've searched it plank by plank, I don't exactly—why, what's the matter?"

Constance was already half-way towards the door. Brooke dragged the inspector to his feet.

"Haslem was at the Café Hollande when we left," he exclaimed, "and, by Heaven, he wasn't there for nothing! Quick! We'll explain on the way."

They hurried into a taxicab.

"Look here," Brooke said, "notwithstanding your search Mr. Simmons, there's something wrong about that place. Paul sent Dupoy there, and you know what happened to him. Haslem is another man with enemies. I tell you he was sitting down there twenty minutes ago. They'd got him."

Mr. Simmons was an unprejudiced person. To a certain extent he believed in Constance, and he believed in Brooke.

"We'll fetch him out, then, at any rate," he declared. "Is there likely to be any trouble, I wonder?"

"If so, we can deal with it," Brooke replied. "Miss Robinson can stay outside and bring in a policeman or two after us, if we don't reappear."

"Miss Robinson will do nothing of the sort," she retorted. "If this is any one's affair, it's mine."

The taxicab pulled up at the corner. They all three hurried across the pavement. The upper room was still filled with a cheerful crowd. They hastened towards the staircase. A waiter intercepted them.

"It is closed down-stairs, *monsieur*," he announced.

Brooke flung him out of the way. They descended quickly. The band had ceased to play, half the lights were out, the doctor had left.

Only Jean was there, standing by the table at which Haslem had been sitting. There was a broken glass upon the floor, the tablecloth seemed to have been dragged sideways. Jean himself was swiftly setting things to rights.

He started and turned round as he

heard footsteps. His face was suddenly almost ghastly. He clutched at the table and stared at them.

"Where is the man who was sitting at that table?" Brooke demanded.

"He has left, *monsieur*," Jean faltered, "five minutes ago. He had had too much to drink."

Brooke glanced towards the other vacant table.

"And the doctor?" he asked.

"He left at nine o'clock, as usual, sir," Jean answered. "He never varies his time. He has patients to receive."

For one second Brooke hesitated. His first impulse was to plunge down into the cellar. Then Constance seized him by the arm.

"Quick!" she almost sobbed into his ear. "Quick!"

She tore up the stairs and they followed her. She flashed through the restaurant, through the swing doors, out into the street and turned sharply down the narrow thoroughfare past the left hand side of the building.

Brooke and Simmons were only a few yards behind. At the end of the restaurant premises stood a narrow house, on the door of which was a brass plate. Outside in the street an ambulance wagon was standing.

Constance leaned with her finger upon the bell. The man looked over from the box seat of the ambulance. He was half frightened, half angry.

"Don't do that!" he cried. "There's some one ill inside."

They took no notice of him. They heard footsteps in the hall. The door was cautiously opened by a woman dressed like a hospital nurse. They broke past her and Brooke threw open the door of the room on the left.

Haslem was there, unconscious, breathing heavily, stretched out on what seemed to be an operating table. The little doctor with the gold spectacles, dressed now in a long linen smock, turned and faced them. Outside, they could hear the ambulance galloping away.

"Drop that knife," Brooke shouted, "or, by Heaven, I'll wring your neck!"

The knife slipped from the man's fingers. For a moment there was silence. A draft was blowing through the room. Brooke glanced away for a single second; a door in the wall stood a little ajar.

"Take that fellow, Simmons," Brooke ordered. "We must get a doctor at once."

The little man with the gold glasses beamed upon them.

"My friends from the Café Hollande!" he remarked. "After all, then, the young lady has wits. Pardon!"

His fingers flashed from his waistcoat pocket to his mouth. He waved Brooke away as he sank into an easy-chair.

"Quite unnecessary," he murmured. "I shall be dead within five minutes. Another martyr to the cause of science! I never could resist these little affairs. One learned so much."

II

MR. HASLEM was able, after all, to give his evidence at the Cannon Street Hotel on the following day, but would-be lunchers at the Café Hollande were disappointed. The doors of the restaurant were closed, without any reason with

which the public was ever made aware other than the painfully sudden death of the proprietor, and Jean — his chief *maitre d'hôtel*.

The disappearance of Paul was wrapped in mystery. He received a telephone message late in the evening and strolled away from the hotel in his full uniform a few minutes later. When the police arrived, he was not to be found. His escape was one of those episodes not mentioned by persons of tact before Inspector Simmons.

Brooke and Constance stood outside the restaurant the next morning and watched the locked doors with complete satisfaction.

"At last," she sighed, "I can go back to my dear little café. Already I am longing for one of Charles's omelettes."

"On this occasion only," Brooke started to plead.

"Very well," she acceded, "you may come."
